UNBOOKS CLASSICS

I Visited Again

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I Visited Again

Hi mom!

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Compiled by GoulashFan, August 2026

I VISITED AGAIN

IT'S BEEN AWHILE since I've been here. Like the boyars of old who gazed a top of some promontory at their little kingdom: the little cottages they once knew, the homedwelling serfs who swelled in numbers as the sun arose and beckoned them to work, all because they were just huge fans of their lord and wished him the very best, both in life and in the coming harvest.

This was me now, for my hometown of Fond du Cloche. I missed the strip malls, the subdivisions, the gutter lined streets where sidewalks would usually be, and the green patches of overgrown inbetweens laced with rusted cans and razor wire and the overwhelming smell of stale piss. I knew right away a great evil had settled in, and I needed to use my advanced skillset of both Judo and Karate, the ancient art of Kudo, to seize that great evil's throne and smash it to pieces. There was no hill where you could see

for miles, but the gothic spire atop St. Germaine's would prove the superior vantage. My first stop: the old dojo.

My old master was there, J'accuse Al-Pastor, and you could bet he had raised a new batch of Kudo broodlings in the art of striking and leg trips. But I could sense as well from the aura of the old dojo, right next to the new boba tea and kebob place, that an infirmity had settled in his heart, and where once was love now lied hate. I jumped from atop St. Germaine's, using my Ki to glide towards the strip mall at the corner of Kucinich and Dulcet. I landed gracefully behind the shrubs by the culvert. Al-Pastor's students were training, using puppies instead of wooden boards to practice their striking.

Back when Al-Pastor served the light, he gave me the most important words of my entire life: "To win for others, there is something you must lose within yourself." It was a koan of infinite meaning, and no meaning at all. It could mean what it must, or it could mean what you wanted it to mean. But, it couldn't mean both.

I knew I had to act right away. The piercing wails of those pups melded incongruously with the "Hi-Yahs!" of Sensei Al-Pastor's pupils. The moment would come soon enough.

JEN DROVE THE rental Prius up to just before the driveway of her old homeplace. She was still

tired from the plane ride, and the hour-and-a-half drive to Fond du Cloche, where she must have passed six other towns like it. She stepped out to see her mother in leopard print, rushing for a hug which she let wrap around her.

"I missed you!" Jen's mom said, followed by a curt, "You smell bad. Also, what are you wearing? Kohl's essentials?"

"Love you too, mom," said Jen. "Where's dad?"

"Somewhere in Uzbekistan. You know, oil-related stuff. How's work? You do any good, uh, copy, or whatever the heck it is you do?"

"Yeah, great, it's going great. The break room kiosk no longer accepts cash, it's all NFC now."

"I don't know what that means. Come in!"

Her mom's place was a two-car garage thing, with a shiplap facade and a lovely stoop ringed by wind chimes and hanging pots, filled with non-native flowers.

Jen stepped inside. The linoleum of her childhood was gone, replaced by the dullish brown of faux-wood vinyl, and the walls were painted an eye-blinding white. The furniture too, was different, perhaps sourced from a fast-casual restaurant where they call the appetizers 'apps'. The fixtures were dull bronze or dull brass, and the ceiling fan was replaced by a mismatched space-age silver thing with wavy blades.

"Oh, I had the place reno'd! It's called DIY

Farmhouse. I shared the pictures with you last week."

"Wow, it looks... different."

"Your room is still the same. Minus all the stuff we couldn't put in storage."

The fridge was different too. A stainless steel obelisk, inset with a sleek screen advertising a strange brand of tomato called heirloom, and a TV show about cowboys. Hanging on the fridge was a wrinkly piece of art, Jen's work, from back when she was six: a family portrait of Jen, her mom, her dad, and her brother, drawn in crude pastels.

"I kept it after all these years. I guess it's one of those things you have to keep!"

Jen looked at the figure meant to be her brother.

"I talked to your brother just a couple hours ago," mom said flatly, "What was that thing, he always said he was the champion of?"

Her brother? She preferred not to think about it. "Yeah, he's a Kudo champion, that's Judo and Karate mixed together."

"Oh, I thought you made that up."

Jen opened the door to her old room, and it swung open almost all the way, except blocked by a column of Costco storage bins. Otherwise, it looked just like how she had left it, the string-up LED lights, the polaroids on a string stuck to the wall, and her bed, with the pillows squared up and covered in blankets and comforters to make it look

like a giant dog sofa. Her old posters were right where she left them, in a disheveled pile in the corner of her closet. She opened the closet door: there was a 5SOS poster, a life-sized one of Liam Payne in a green hoodie, Sherlock and Watson all in black with the two smoldering for the camera, and most disturbingly of all, a poster of the Onceler with his signature shades. She winced, and closed the door.

Jen fell into the bed headfirst, and fell asleep.

I REMEMBERED THE words my mother told me. “There is a great evil inside Fond du Cloche. Your old master, he may know more than he lets on. Fly, child!” Also, her name is Katy. So when you hear about my mother, or Jen’s mother, which are the same, remember that her name is Katy.

By now the dojo pups were being pelted by ninja stars, and my heart overrode the concerns of my brain, which demanded I strike only in the dead of night. I lunged forward, crossing the parking lot, immediately disabling the sentries flanking the double doors with my electric batons. I swung the doors open, and immediately, Sensei Al-Pastor and his clutch of twenty students stopped their drills and turned to face me. The light of human decency was gone from their eyes, replaced only by an all-encompassing lust for violence. Sweat and puppy blood pooled around their feet.

“Al-Pastor!” I screamed. “I’ve come for information: where is the great evil which has now taken over Fond du Cloche? I must destroy it!”

“You fool,” he croaked, “It is not evil that dwells in Fond du Cloche, but merely a new truth, an unsparing one, which blinds the eyes and sears the hides of the unbelieving, but to the worthy reveals newer and ever greater revelation! Will you join me? Or wither like the worm you are?”

“One last chance, that is what I will give you, my old sensei. Please, for the sake of our once warm friendship, cease from this darkly path and return to the light I once knew was within you!”

Al-Pastor did not answer. He only raised his arms, pointing straight at me. His students jumped into action, and they sprinted like leopards towards me, screaming all the way.

Two portly men in flame-red gi tried to flank me, but I dispatched them quickly with my imanari rolls. Another tried to chop me with his hands, covered in crushed cement and industrial waste, but I cooly dispatched him with a question mark kick.

They all took turns trying to subdue me, and as each one fell the hateful visage of Sensei Al-Pastor grew meaner and meaner.

Now, there was only me, and my old master. I eyed him warily, him drawing his flaming katana from his dimensionless gi.

With a quick slashing motion, he attempted a

strike. Naturally, I had anticipated his blow, and his fiery sword struck nothing but air.

Behind him, I whispered, “Master, forgive me.” A quick karate chop to the head rendered him dead. In his person, I discovered a wrinkled pamphlet. In it was scrawled, “St. Germaine High School Cafeteria, 4PM” in human blood! Gross!

WHEN JEN CAME to, she saw her mom tugging at her pants leg.

“Hey, Jen? Jen? Honey? You awake?”

“Mom, what?”

“You’re going to miss Aunt Alma’s birthday! She only turns fifty-seven once!”

That was the ostensible reason Jen took the weekend off to visit. Really, it was the nudging texts and the soft pang of guilt and panic at considering her mother’s mortality. Still, she had to at least show her face there.

Alma’s place was across town, in a neighborhood of McMansions called Lancashire Lakes, which possessed precisely one lake. Jen loaded up her mom’s red SUV with a store-bought sheetcake and a few cold party casseroles Katy planned to reheat there. Katy was incessantly proud of her excellent casseroles, and their uncanny ability to keep despite being hours from having been baked.

Jen and Katy drove to Alma’s separately. Jen’s phone was beeping and whirring from texts and

Slack notifications. She thought for a second how sweet it would feel to throw the thing out the window out of spite, and she caught herself almost reaching for the window switches, but she kept her hands at the two and ten, watching the speedometer display of the Prius HUD climb to thirty-five.

Katy parked inside Alma's garage. Jen parked at the curb. I feel very proud of Alma, for her continued insistence on having brunch parties well into her fifties, thought Jen. The audacity of it.

Alma's place looked the same as it did from way back in Jen's memory. It was cavernous, with the sliding stone facade and the semi-timeless Tuscan interior style which brought her back to the memory of Alma's radio playing classics from Paula Cole and Sixpence None The Richer (already a decade old by then), while her snot-nosed cousins chased each other around the granite countertops, and Alma would scream because one time Jen busted her nose running around it too, and she had to go to the hospital to stop the bleeding.

There were maybe ten, eleven partygoers at Alma's. The guests were at the cusp of geriatric, mostly Alma's friends and maybe a half-quarter cousin here and there, anyone available on a Saturday afternoon. Jen remembered the halcyon days when Saturdays were work free.

Jen sat at the end of the couch, the one Alma

called a ‘Davenport’, furthest from the door, in an area unlit by the sunlight coming through the open curtains. Then, Jen saw him, coming in from the cold, clad in a Carhartt hoodie and a trucker cap which covered a mat of brown, stubbly hair. Is that Matt? From St. Germaine’s? He still lives in Fond du Cloche?

“Holy shit. Jen, is that you?”

“Hey… Matt?” Jen looked up. She rose from her seat, and gave Matt a perfunctory hug. Is that a mustache? She thought.

“What… are you doing at my aunt’s place?”

“I’m doing her shed. Her husband wants an epoxy floor, which I think is pretty cool.”

“Yeah, I bet…”

“Because epoxy means it’s not just a storage shed, but a workspace. You know, I did your mom —you’re mom’s house.”

“Oh, wow.”

“Yeah, I did the backsplash too… God, how long has it been?”

“Like, nine, ten years, maybe.”

“Oh, man, those were the days. Those were the days.”

“Yeah… you look really different.” She meant mainly the mustache.

“Goddamn, you look exactly the same.” Matt was taken back to the sight of Jen, awkward and supine in the back of his mom’s Kia Sorento, her face red and covered in a film of sweat. He

remembered his back hurting, and how he was sure everyone could see his derriere through the passenger window. Why did they get rid of bench seats? He thought to himself.

Jen could see him reminisce from that twinkle in his eyes. Some of his sweat had ended up in her eye, she could feel the sting of it just now. “It was, so, so long ago… you had hair back then,” Jen said. “I mean, hair on the top of your head.”

“Well, yeah, like I buzz it now because of my job. I have a totally normal hairline.”

“Yeah, I can tell.”

“Shit, remember when your mom was out, and she’d put this little thing of tape on the front door, so you’d sneak me past the window and we’d… watch those weird nerdy cartoons you like? Like, there was the one where the kids are yelling, and he’s inside a robot, that’s actually his mom?”

Jen remembered her mom tearing strips of Scotch Blue, and the way she’d inspect the tape for little granules of dust or creases, and how she’d roar with consternation when she found the tape missing. “I put it in three places!” she’d scream, and Jen would say, “It’s carpenter tape, it’s gonna peel off from the wind, you’re crazy!”

Jen laughed a little, despite herself. “No, no, Jesus Christ, those were your shows, you were the nerd.”

Matt blushed. “Okay, clearly, your memory is failing you. I was never a nerd, I’m not into that,

what do you call them? Animes? Animus? You should see a psychiatrist."

One or two more guests found their way to Alma's. Jen receded further into the couch, desperately responding to the torrent of Slack messages which pinged her phone. Matt was still in the kitchen, drinking from the cooler of diet beers that Alma had left for whatever husbands her friends had dragged along. Matt winced at the Bud Lights and went straight for the Millers.

ST. GERMAINE'S CAFETERIA. It was part of a public education complex situated approximately some distance from the church, the town's landmark and namesake for many of its finest institutions. Despite it's divine adjacent name, it was technically a public school, which is a detail I'm happy to give you for free. It was the site of many of my most rewarding educational and also societal, friend-related experiences, and perhaps little to none of my sister's, who was a little lanky, and a total dork. Still, I loved her, as I did all my family, and all of Fond du Cloche.

The cafeteria itself was quiet, eerily quiet. Long gone were the line of children in their finest district mandated polo shirts, eating a hearty meal of dinosaur shaped chicken coagulate and smile-shaped potato coagulate. Long gone were the hair-netted lunch ladies, who would sneak you the lunch special instead of the cold bread and

cheddar slice sandwiches they gave to anyone deep into lunch debt. Now, it was empty for the summer.

Suddenly I heard it, a smattering of sharp steps hitting the lunchroom linoleum, followed by the sight of a ghastly procession. Black-clad robes, men in vestments with glowing trails along the seams, as if flowing with demonic blood. They hummed some arcane tune from long ago, possibly in Latin, or ancient Greek, or even modern Greek. Suddenly, a figure emerged from within the procession, wearing an even sicker looking set of robes which glowed with some orange as well. He walked towards the middle of the cafeteria, now clear as the lunch tables were folded off to the side. He lowered his hood, revealing the face of... Horatio!

My friend, Horatio! My partner in demon hunting (I'm a demon hunter too, by the way), now led astray? I felt sick to my stomach. Quickly, a bitterness welled inside me, along with a demand for justice.

I exploded out of that AC vent and landed spectacularly by the cultic procession. I unsheathed my own blade, like a shardblade from the Cosmere series, except even cooler and glowing blue and white to represent my inherent good.

I screamed, "Horatio!? WHY!???"

“JOE’S COMING!” ALMA said. “You remember him, right? St. Germaine’s?”

Jen froze. “… Mr. Escrow?”

“The one and only. Isn’t that fun, Jen, two old friends in one day? Right?” Alma elbowed Matt in the stomach, who almost heaved from the gallon of diet beer lurching in his stomach. Jen spotted a minivan parking in the driveway, now three cars deep. A man in a tasteful cardigan stepped out from the driver’s seat, followed by a grinning blonde carrying another pan of sheet cake. That’s too many sheet cakes, Jen thought.

Mr. Escrow, AP History. He would insist on being called Joe. Freshman year, Mr. Escrow took one look at her essay on “Common Sense” by Thomas Paine, and he said to her with such warmth, “You are remarkable. Are you sure you don’t have a doctorate? Am I talking to a Paine scholar here?” Jen’s dad was out of the picture back then, somewhere off in Iraq, helping them reconstruct their oil derricks or something. When Joe offered to drive Jen to school, Katy beamed with pride. There’s a good man, he sees real potential in my Jen. Every week they’d visit the Escrow home, have dinner with his wife and kids, and Mrs. Escrow would brag in one turn and complain in the next, about the fecundity of her sunchokes. They’re worse than the green beans, they grow everywhere.

Mr. Escrow was just past the door at Alma’s.

His hair was all grey, and the lines on his forehead were deeper, but he was more or less the same. He laughed when Katy asked him about the sunchokes. Oh, they're probably past the county limits by now. He made his way to the counter, and by now he was flanked on both sides by old friends.

"Don't be rude, Joe's here!" Katy took Jen by the arm and raised her up standing, leading her by the shoulder to that gymnasium of a kitchen. "He's been so good to me, especially after all our kids up and left!"

"Jen? Katy told me you'd be here." Mr. Escrow looked at Jen, with the same warmth from her essay days. Jen remembered the stinging in her eyes again, that foreign sweat dripping right into her eyeballs. "You know, you were a joy to have in class, and I knew you were destined for great things."

Jen kept still. She looked past his eyes, staring at his nose instead.

"A job in New York? The City? I'm so proud of you. You've blossomed into a remarkable young woman."

Jen looked at Mr. Escrow. He was shorter now, or maybe she'd grown taller. One thought formed in her mind, and drowned out all others: I have to get out of here.

She tried to speak, but nothing came out. She walked past Mr. Escrow, hoping to beeline to the

door. “Sorry, I have to go now,” she said finally, to no one in particular.

Jen hadn’t even cleared the kitchen when she felt the force of a hand squeezing her arm. She looked behind, thinking it was Katy. She had an excuse already worked up in her head about work, a project deadline, a thing common in work-related contexts. Projects. And deadlines.

When she turned, she saw it was Joe. “Jen, I’m sorry if I—”

Jen yanked her arm away wildly. Wordlessly, almost thoughtlessly, she took the open, half-eaten pan of tater tot hotdish and threw it right at Mr. Escrow’s face. A split-second later, she realized what she’d done. The music stopped. They were all looking at her, dumbfounded.

She ran out the door. She stumbled across the lovely bermuda grass of Alma’s front lawn, panicking as she groped for the keys in her pockets. She took the Prius and drove off, going way past thirty-five.

“WE MEET AGAIN! Once we were brothers, but now, we can be something more, if only you shed the illusions of your past, and choose... the darkness!” Horatio looked splendid in his vestments, an image not unlike that of Milton’s Satan, except his wings also had claws at the end of them.

“Horatio... why?” There was pain in my voice,

a pain which reflected the agony of facing yet another betrayal. We had grown up in that same dojo, we were both the prized peers of Al-Pastor, but now, we were enemies, divided by a war deeper than human reckoning.

A few of the hooded men uncloaked themselves, revealing their muscly bods filled with arcane tattoos. They screamed in unison, and they tried to swarm me, but with one casual flick of my blade, they all stumbled, and fell: headless, with their tongues sticking out in kind of a gay way.

“An impressive trick, Old Friend. Sadly for you, there’s no stopping the bloodletting.”

I looked out into the cafeteria windows. The sky turned black with storm clouds, and a Satanic skull formed from the lightning in the sky. It grinned and boomed with a voice that seemed to say, “Evil! Hahahaha!”

“Soon, Fond du Cloche will fall to the horde!” Horatio raised his own blade, which was red, and orange, but mostly red. “Only one of us is leaving here alive!”

I raised my own weapon in tandem. We circled each other, testing each other’s skills with feints, parries and ripostes. He was almost my equal, almost, but he made one small slip. I jumped away from his slash at an oblique angle, and skewered him right between the ribs. I cried out, “Horatio! The wound is not yet fatal! Yield and I will stay my blade!”

Horatio sneered, and pushed himself closer towards the sword which had pierced his side.

"I die happy, knowing it is over. The very spire you were perched upon, that is where... the ritual... will commence." And with that last word, he died. I held him in my arms as the last of his crimson life fluid weeped from the wound at his side, the wound I had made with my lance. Which is also a sword. You can think of it as a sword-lance.

Was Horatio mocking me with this knowledge, or was the last vestige of his goodness crying out for absolution? Either way, he had helped me in his last moments, and for that he shall remain forever my friend.

JEN HAD PARKED in the shade of a lopsided tree, in the far corner of the parking lot of St. Germaine Catholic Church. For whatever reason, its trunk grew at an angle, and the leaves and branches formed a kind of shield which kept your car out of sight from the parking lot entrance, especially at night. You could hide a lifted pickup truck here, or an ugly beige Kia Sorento with a crack on the front passenger window. For an hour she just waited there, screaming into a travel pillow she had bought specifically for the trip, or lying there catatonic.

She walked to the public park across the street from the church, the park her brother used to play

in, the one where she spun the merry-go-round so fast that he tripped, hit his head on the mulch and grew a welt the size of a tangerine. A small one, but still. Jen sat at a rusted swing set, swaying to the beat of some indie song about crack babies not knowing what they wanted. The sky grew cloudy, and by the smell you could tell it would rain soon.

It was about thirty-seven minutes before Jen saw a truck pulling up to the church. Matt stepped out, running across the street over to the swing set. Jen thought about running again, but by then, she had lost the will to do anything but sway, and the nearest casserole pan was miles out. She thought how lovely it would be, to dissolve into sea foam, or get struck by lightning. Anything but talking to anybody about anything, to waver permanently in everyone else's heads between pity and disgust, or disgust and disbelief, or just plain old disgust.

Matt sat at the swing set seat next to Jen.

"Uh, hey. Your mom's worried about you." Matt looked at his shoes. "I think she thinks you had an episode, or a fugue state."

They sat in silence for a minute, before Matt asked, "Can I ask, why did you throw the casserole at Mr. E?"

Jen swayed a little more, running her feet through the rubber mulch, which was just plainly inferior to the natural stuff they had when she was a kid. She gave an answer she had practiced

saying in the car.

"I was kind of hoping he'd be dead by now," she whispered. She cleared her throat. "Yeah, I just let my intrusive thoughts win."

"Hey, Jen. I don't think that's it, like. I don't want to pry, but—"

"But you're gonna do it anyway," she snapped at him.

"Look, I just want to help you. I mean, did I freak you out or anything? I'm sorry, I was just, I got ahead of myself and I was really happy to see you. You were like, the coolest person ever."

"You don't believe that."

"No, really. It's just, I loved how you had an opinion about everything. I loved how you always knew what you were talking about. I loved how you'd look at the popular girls, you'd look at everyone, like you knew they weren't shit, like they could turn into worms for all you cared."

Jen turned to look at him. "That was me being an asshole! That was me thinking I was better than everyone else, because I thought, because I couldn't connect with anybody, that meant I was better than them. But I'm not. I'm delusional! I don't know why you ever liked me. Maybe your standards are just that fucking low."

"You're just gonna push people away forever?"

"No, not people, just you! Because you're a fucking idiot!" Jen took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, I don't know, I just don't want to be here right

now. I can't go back to my mom's. I can't."

"Hey, hey, it's okay. I get it. I can just sit with you here, okay?"

They stayed quiet for a little while, before Matt started again. "I don't know if you want to hear this. I just really miss your brother. He was like my little brother too. I remember, we'd play out in the yard, he was Miocic, I was Werdum, and he'd never let me be Miocic. I'd always get knocked out!"

"Yeah, yeah, I miss him too."

"I get that. But, I'm just really curious, why'd you throw the casserole at Mr. E?"

Jen looked at him. She sighed. At least she had a statement ready.

"My mom cheated on my dad with Mr. E. It was terrible, I like, caught them in the kitchen doing the nasty. It made me lose trust in my parental figures and, uh, authority figures in general. It was very traumatizing, and sad."

"Hmm..." Matt pondered, "Yeah, I guess that checks out. It's a little disproportionate, but I get it."

"I don't even know why I came here," Jen said to herself. "I thought I was ready, but I wasn't. I couldn't even look him in the eye. It was like, everything I said to myself didn't matter."

"Hey, you know what'll cheer you up? They're demolishing the mall today. Wanna see it?"

THE SKY ABOVE Fond du Cloche was a roiling tempest of black and red. I wore my finest leather trench coat, and my slickest pair of nighttime sunglasses. On one end, me, on the other, the spire atop St. Germaine. Five hundred feet tall. The tallest building, perhaps ever. In my way, five hundred thousand demons. In the center of that boiling storm was the spire, inert this morning, but now flaring with the power of a million, trillion suns. I remembered the words of my old master, Sensei Al-Pastor, back when he was a good guy, rather than a bad guy with horns on his head.

"To win for others, there is something you must lose within yourself."

I started jogging at a steady pace, and a few demons, now in their full monstrous form, tried to attack me. I used my sword-lance (which also has a gun in it), to dispatch them. Another demon, this time a fat one, tried to crush me with his body, but I did an oblique kick, which sent him flying far away, far out beyond the county line. The more I trudged on, the harder the path became. The more demons I had killed, the uglier the remaining ones became. After many hard hours of fighting, I had killed them all. I had crushed them, flattened them, pancaked them, skewered them, turned their guts into Swiss cheese and their brains into tartare. Still, one demon remained, and he was the vilest one of all.

"Surprise! It is I! Drapula!" It was like a

mixture of Dracula and Vapula, which was very scary, more scary than either of the two creatures combined.

"A demon... who's also a vampire? How was this possible?"

Drapula spread his wings out. He was over thirty feet tall, but his wings were the length of a humpback whale. He flew towards me, gaining speed as he swooped in a dive bomb position from up atop that spire.

"Once I kill you, and steal the power of your amazing Kudo skills, I will have the power to affect the corporeal, and the mental plane!"

As he flew by me, I sliced his demonic, spiky head open with my sword-lance-gun. For a split second, I thought I had won, but with each slice of my sword, another head grew in its place, like a Hydra, but even cooler, because each head had another head dangling from the vampire fangs out of its mouths. I knew right away that if I kept swinging, Drapula would have infinite heads, which would cause infinite problems.

Simple, I thought, the spire was focusing their power, destroying it would destroy Drapula once and for all. With one last heave of my sword, the spire was destroyed. Yet still, even as the Church steeple was gutted into a million pieces, Drapula persisted. I realized in horror that the spire wasn't the thing sustaining the demons: it was... me!

I knew my powers of destruction were too

convenient! It mattered not if I could kill a million demons, if a million more were to spawn in my wake.

Drapula smirked. “Even knowing the truth, what is there left to do?”

My old master’s words echoed in my head, and like the volta of a particularly violent sonnet, the truth of its words were finally revealed. I knew now what I must do. There is an evil inside me, an evil that only I could extinguish. My last thoughts were that of my mother in her leopard print, and my sister, looking goofy as always.

With peace in my heart, I turned that sword against myself, and just before I took that last step into oblivion, the last voice I could hear was that of old Drapula himself, screaming as he melted into sea foam.

MATT AND JEN stood right by the edge of the demolition site, by the concrete dividers and the polyester privacy fences. A crowd had formed around the old mall, most of them children with their phones up. Most of the mall, save for the part of it that was already a Menards, would be demolished, and from the ashes of that old wreck would come a relatively modest lifestyle center, and some semi-affordable housing. Jen was ashamed to say it, but the Hot Topic closing was the end of an era for her.

Some of the kids were taking their stupid

electric bikes and doing wheelies painfully close to the other pedestrians. They moved so close you could feel the air around you shift. Jen felt a slight urge to slide her foot right over their rear wheels, tripping a kid and destroying her shin in the process, but she caught herself before she could do it. She resigned herself to watching the old mall collapse, brick by brick. It was right before sunset, and the light of the sun had dimmed into something you could watch with your eyes.

A couple beat cops rushed to kick them out of the parking lot. It's not safe with all the dust getting picked up, they said. They shooed them further away, past the point they could feel the rumble of the excavators under their feet.

"Man, this was kind of boring," Matt said. He asked gingerly, "Hey, Jen, did you want to maybe __"

"No," she said flatly. "I'm sorry. You're great. Thanks, but no."

Matt looked out at the excavators pushing the last of the walls down. He looked back at Jen, and imagined the weight of her leaning on his shoulders. "Did you ever like me?" Matt asked.

"Of course, you're very likeable." Jen imagined him without the mustache, when he still had that mop of brown curls.

"No, I don't mean if I was likeable. I mean, were you ever able to like me, or like anyone, back then?"

Jen breathed in deep, exhaled, and closed her eyes as she said, “I… liked that you were around. I’m glad you were there.” She paused, before asking casually, “You got a cigarette?”

Matt went to grab one out of his back pocket, like he’d do for her all those years ago, before he realized, “Oh, sorry Jen, I quit years ago.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Matt dropped Jen off at the church where the rental Prius was parked. He watched her drive off just as the last of the sunset light had receded. He felt as if she had picked him up like an old snow globe from a leftover drawer in some shed, and then placed him back to collect dust forever. He sulked a little bit, and wondered maybe if he could still pick up some drywall anchors before he got back to his place.

Jen pulled up to the driveway of her old childhood home. Katy was waiting there by the stoop.

“Oh my God, you had me worried!” Katy rubbed away some of the mall dust from under Jen’s eyes. “I talked to Joe, and he’s not pressing charges. He totally understands. I told him about what you’re going through at work, and how you’ve always been special. He knows more than anyone that you’re special.”

“Special?”

“No, not re—I mean, not slow. I mean, you were never good at talking to people! Of course,

the party was loud and bright, you were overwhelmed with excitement and fear and you reacted in the physical way, because you didn't have the words."

"I'm not sure how to feel about that."

"Look, Jen. Joe was there when your father wasn't. I know you think the world of him, but being happy to see him doesn't mean you're betraying your father."

Jen could see that her mom understood perfectly, there was no need to correct the record. It was spot on.

"Mom..." Jen felt ready to collapse. "I..."

"Well, what is it?"

Jen paused. "I... I've been taking some anti-anxiety meds, and loss of impulse control was one of the symptoms. I didn't want to tell you, because I didn't want you to worry."

Wordlessly, almost thoughtlessly, Katy gave Jen a great big hug. Jen held back as many tears as she could. "Oh, my girl, my sweet girl," Katy said. And when the urge to cry had been purged, she walked quietly to her oversized dog sofa bed, and slept.